

Argentine Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio elected as Pope Francis

by [Alessandro Speciale](#) and [Kevin Eckstrom](#)

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) Argentinian Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected as Pope Francis on Wednesday (March 13), after only two days of voting in the conclave tasked with choosing a successor to Pope Benedict XVI.

Bergoglio, 76, has served as the archbishop of Buenos Aires since 1998 and was made a cardinal in 2001. He is the first Latin American and the first Jesuit to rise to the papacy.

According to anonymous reports of the 2005 conclave, he was the leading contender against then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who became Benedict XVI.

In his first address to the huge crowd that had gathered in St Peter's Square, Francis asked for the prayers of "all men and women of good will" to help him lead the Catholic Church.

Speaking in Italian, he jokingly remarked: "As you know the duty of the conclave is to give Rome a bishop. It seems that my brother cardinals went almost to the end of the world."

In a remarkable gesture of humility, the new pope then asked the throngs to pray for him before he offered his first blessing as the 266th pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church.

"The Holy Father has already shown us his deep humility in the invitation to pray with him, for him and for the church," Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley -- himself considered a contender in the conclave -- said after Francis' election.

The Vatican's top spokesman, the Rev. Federico Lombardi, said Francis placed a telephone call after his election to Benedict, who left the Vatican on Feb. 28 for the papal summer residence at Castel Gandolfo. Benedict plans to return to the Vatican in the coming weeks to live out his retirement in a retrofitted convent.

Lombardi said Francis' formal installation Mass will be held on Tuesday, March 19.

President Obama welcomed the pope's election, saying, "As a champion of the poor and the most vulnerable among us, he carries forth the message of love and compassion that has inspired the world for more than two thousand years -- that in each other we see the face of God."

Cardinals who participated in the two-day conclave also welcomed his election, with New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, promising that "the bishops of the United States and the people of our 195 dioceses offer prayers for our new leader and promise allegiance to him."

Much of the attention focused on Francis' roots in the Jesuit order, a legion of priests committed to the poor and education but also known for an independent streak and a willingness to buck authority.

"It's remarkable that they've chosen a Jesuit," said Stanley Hauerwas, a respected Protestant theologian at Duke Divinity School "That's even more remarkable than choosing a non-European."

Lombardi, himself a Jesuit, was equally struck.

"Personally, I am shocked that I have a Jesuit pope as they usually serve the church but not in a position of authority. They usually try to resist high-level appointments, let alone pope. It must have been a strong call."

It was unclear if the new pope took his name to honor St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of peace and nature, or St. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit icon. Either way, Hauerwas sensed immense symbolism: "That he's a Jesuit says so much about his commitment to the poor, and that he's taken the name of Francis ... clearly gestures that the Roman Catholic Church not only serves the poor, the Roman Catholic Church is the church of the poor."

Francis' election was a win for those who had wanted a pope from Latin America, which is home to some 40 percent of the world's Catholics.

The former cardinal is known as an unassuming prelate who opted for a small room in a downtown residence instead of the more ornate archbishop's palace. He was known to take the bus to work and cook his own meals.

The Jesuit fought fiercely against the left-leaning liberation theology movement that swept Latin America in the 1980s and caught the attention of many Jesuit priests. Yet he also emerged as a champion of the poor and outcast, chastising Catholic priests who refused to baptize the children of unmarried mothers.

"Between a church that suffers accidents in the street, and a church that's sick because it's self-referential, I have no doubts about preferring the former," he said recently, according to a profile by the National Catholic Reporter's Vatican correspondent, John Allen.

Born in 1936 to Italian immigrant parents in Buenos Aires, Bergoglio joined the Jesuit order and was ordained in 1969.

After rising through the ranks of Argentina's Jesuits, in the 1980s he lived in Germany, where he earned a doctorate in theology, before being appointed auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires in 1992. He became the city's archbishop six years later.

A vocal advocate for the poor during the devastating economic crisis that struck his country in recent years, Bergoglio was well-known in Argentina for his simple lifestyle. When he was made a cardinal in 2001, he reportedly told Argentinians who were collecting money to fly to Rome for the festivities to stay at home and give the money to the poor.

His reputation emerged unscathed by reports, leaked ahead of the 2005 conclave, over his role in the kidnapping of two liberal Jesuit priests during the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina in the '70s.

Bergoglio is considered a social conservative and staunch supporter of traditional Catholic doctrine on issues such as abortion or gay marriage. But he is also known for his keen pastoral sense and for his preference for a church that shuns privileges and honors.

"Spiritual worldliness ... is the church's worst sin," he said in an interview with Italian daily La Stampa during the October 2012 Synod on New Evangelization, when he called on the church to "go out from itself towards the outskirts."

"We need to come out of ourselves and head for the periphery," he said. "We need to avoid the spiritual sickness of a church that is wrapped up in its own world: when a church becomes like this, it grows sick."

As a bishop, he promoted the social justice themes that are very strongly felt in the Latin American church. But at the same time he never shared the political activism of some of his fellow Jesuits, especially during turbulent times in the '70s.

In 2005, despite his lack of experience in the Roman Curia, he emerged as the main candidate against then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

He reportedly garnered up to 40 votes then, gathering the support of the relatively liberal among the cardinals who wanted a less narrow focus on doctrinal orthodoxy in the Catholic Church.

Cardinals take a vow of secrecy about the conclave proceedings, but Bergoglio said after the 2005 conclave: "I recall a climate of intense recollection. We were all conscious of being nothing but instruments, to serve divine providence in electing a proper successor for John Paul II."

The announcement of his election came as nightfall settled on Rome and rain clouds dampened the sky. White smoke billowed from the chimney atop the Sistine Chapel at 7:06 p.m., as the bells of St. Peter's Basilica started ringing and thousands of people cheered in St. Peter's Square.

"Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum: Habemus Papam!" French Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran announced from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, using the traditional Latin formula for "I announce great news! We have a pope!"

Cardinals reached the two-thirds majority (77 votes) needed for the election of a new pope after only five ballots and two days of voting.